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CHANGE

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VOICES

Change of Life

by Kate Sprutta Elliott

A couple of years ago, singer John Mayer had a hit song called “Waiting on the World to Change.” It is a song about discontent and hope—and unlike most songs about these themes, it is gentle, not angry. In the season of Advent, we, too, are waiting on the world to change. We wait with longing for Jesus, the messiah, “God-with-us.” The coming of Jesus changed the world once and for all—and changes us still.

In this session of the Bible study of Romans, Sarah Henrich writes of how our lives are changed by our relationship with Jesus: “Now that we are baptized, we serve under the flag of a new ruler, God. So whether we think of it as a change of citizenship or a change of ownership, baptism is a real change in our life situation.”

The effects of that change are explored in Patricia Lull’s “Changed by Baptism.” She describes how our lives are shaped by the sacrament: “Whatever else we may experience, once we are baptized, we belong to Christ. His death and resurrection now define the center of our lives—not just sometimes, but all the time.” Baptism may bring grace-filled change to our lives, but some change is not so welcome.

Sometimes change is difficult, even painful. Debra Farrington recounts times of challenging transitions in her life in “Keeping the Faith.” Using the Exodus story as a guide, she shares some of the insights she gained during those anxious days—“I have to remind myself often that I don’t know what God’s plans are for

me, much less for those around me or in the world as a whole. A few teaspoons of humility can help me be open to what change might bring.”

As we journey through Advent, how do we actively wait for the world to change? Elyse Nelson Winger reflects on the prophet Anna and her prayer in the temple (Luke 2:36–38). Winger writes: “There is a time to wait. And the way we wait makes all the difference. The way we wait, as baptized and called children of God, begins in knowing that we are a part of a promise that is now *and* not yet, seed *and* flower, Christ with us *and* Christ coming again.”

So we wonder: What do we do in the meantime? How do we make the most of our waiting? One thing we do is to gather together to study God’s word. In “The Gift of Bible Study” Audrey West encourages us to see how *we* can be the change the world is waiting for: “We become more fluent in the language of faith . . . that helps us express our deepest beliefs and guide our most important choices. Along the way, we become the yeast that leavens our churches . . . and passes along to future generations the most precious gift of all: the life-saving love of God that comes to the world through God’s only begotten Son, Jesus.”

May you be blessed in these seasons of waiting and rejoicing. On behalf of our staff, I wish you a blessed Advent and a joy-filled Christmas. 🌿

Kate Sprutta Elliott is editor of *Lutheran Woman Today*. You may write to her at LWT@elca.org.



VE US THIS DAY

he Gift of ight

Pamela Fickenscher

Every year at Christmas

we hear the pundits and the preachers declare what our *real* problem with the holiday is. Credit cards. Santa. Perfectionism. Unrealistic expectations. Maybe it's the media. Maybe it's the darkness.

There is some truth to all of this, but part of the problem, I believe, is that we don't really know how to give and receive gifts.

Sure, we all exchange gifts, but *how* they are given and received varies widely. I knew this the first time I spent Christmas with my husband. We gathered around the tree, and someone said, "I'll go get the knife."

"Knife?"

I learned quickly that in my husband's family, gifts are not simply torn into. Every present is to be opened with surgical precision, so that the paper might be re-used. And every gift is to be acknowledged and gushed over with the same methodical order. This was not how I was raised.

We all spoke English, but that first Christmas morning with him, I felt like I was studying a foreign culture.

Anthropologists tell us that despite such differences, giving and receiving gifts are a universal human practice. They are a way of social exchange. The expectations that go with a gift, however, are not always clear—so much so that any gift we receive may feel laden with obligations. I sometimes find myself hoping early in December that some people won't give me anything—so that I won't have to wonder what to give them in return.

Maybe that's why the idea that God gives us an eternal gift can feel like a guilt trip. We can hardly imagine a gift that is neither a thank-you for something that we have done nor an expectation that we will follow suit.

As an old translation says, "And the light shineth in the darkness, and the darkness *comprehended* him not."

We receive this gift, and we can't understand it. As human beings, we're very good at looking at the flip side of every good thing. We focus on our weaknesses instead of our strengths. Someone compliments us—we wonder if there's a criticism hidden inside or if we're being flattered for a reason. We receive a gift, and we immediately feel burdened by it.

But when the Gospel of John speaks of this most perfect gift of God, it's all boiled down to the most elemental gift of all: light. Light, which is the origin of all life, the purest of all gifts. Light, which simply *is*. It is not defeated or diminished by darkness. When you open the door from a lit room to a dark one, the lit room does not become less bright. Light is, in a sense, completely generous.

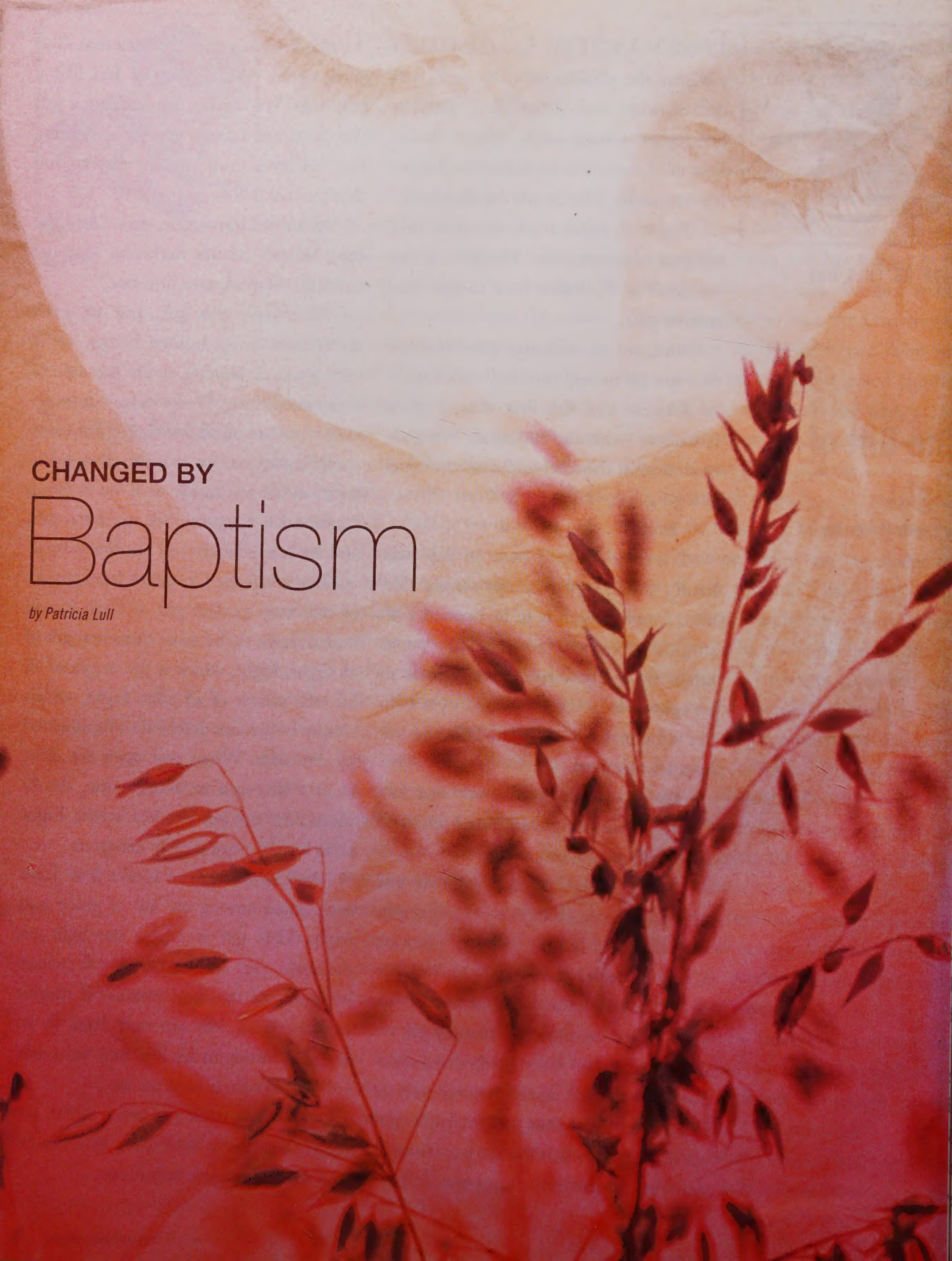
And so this gift of God's Son, John says, came among us, full of grace and truth. This gift is Light, the light no darkness can overcome, a gift which need not be returned because it cannot even be held. We can only bask in its warmth, drink in its life, and light our candles to take it with us. 🌸

Pamela Fickenscher is a pastor, mother, and blogger. She lives in Minneapolis, Minn. See her blog at www.pastorpam.typepad.com.

CHANGED BY

Baptism

by Patricia Lull



in the letter to the Romans, St. Paul describes our lives as being changed by baptism.

What kind of change is this? Is the new reality that accompanies baptism more like a grievous loss or change for the better?

The three-year-old son of a friend of mine was baptized last summer. After the service, his mother asked him what he thought of the experience. He said, "Mom, it wasn't so bad." We might wonder whether this preschooler was commenting on the experience of standing before the congregation and the amount of water that washed over his head or intuiting something more profound about the whole experience as young children are often able to do in matters of faith).

As Christians, we trust that something really happened to that three-year-old in this sacramental event. It was more than a ceremonial bath in front of a group of family members and friends. Whether or not he understands the fullness of his experience, as Paul has written, this child has been united with Christ in a way that will carry him all the days of his life. He has been changed by baptism.

A few months ago my sister Jean heard Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson preach. During the sermon, Bishop Hanson urged the congregation to remember their baptism every day. She told me, "Now I look

in the mirror each morning, then place my hand on my head, and say aloud, 'I am a child of God and I have a purpose in life.'"

Baptized more than 80 years ago, this recent widow has found renewed purpose and hope in remembering her baptismal identity. She knows much more about the trials and challenges of real life than does a three-year-old, and yet the news of being changed by baptism has come to her in a fresh and vibrant way in this later season of her life.

Whether we were baptized as infants or as adults, what does it mean to live a life united with Christ and his death and resurrection? What does it mean to be changed by baptism?

Theology of grace

As Lutheran Christians, we have an understanding of baptism that includes a sense of tension or paradox. We believe that baptism is a sacrament that *both* changes us once and for all *and* gives us a new identity into which we grow through the many seasons and experiences of our life. The way we are changed in baptism is deeply personal and yet also transforms our relationship to the world in the broadest sense.

Most of all, we confess that the change that comes to us in baptism comes through God's activity—not through our own theological

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

(Romans 6:3–5)

understanding or personal endeavor. These convictions grow out of Paul's testimony about the baptized life in his letter to the Romans.

Lutherans confess that baptism, like its sister sacrament of holy communion, is God's gift and not a mark of our own achievement. We acknowledge this when we speak of baptism in terms of the theology of grace. Lutherans join many other Christians in baptizing infants and young children, as well as welcoming into the baptismal life adolescents and adults who have heard the invitation to follow Christ. When Paul writes about Abraham in Romans 4, he outlines the theology of grace by which the promises given to the patriarch rested not on his shoulders but upon the trustworthiness of God.

Think of baptismal services you have attended. While parents and sponsors (or those being baptized if they are adolescents or adults) are asked to make commitments about how the newly baptized will live as Christians, the sacrament itself is pure gift. The liturgy does not call for a chronicling of previous achievements. Rather, the word and the water bespeak the generosity of the God we know as Father, Son, and Spirit. Consequently, the change that occurs in baptism is a change that happens to us through God's presence and power at work in our lives.

Saints and sinners

Lutherans speak of their lives as ones in which we are at the same time saints and sinners. You may have heard the Latin phrase *simul justus et peccator* used to describe this tension in which the baptized live in the new reality of being united with the Risen Christ and yet wrestle with the same temptations that besiege all people.

For the three-year-old, being both saint and sinner was probably apparent before the day of his baptism was even over. The widow in her 80s could certainly tell you of times when she wished she had trusted more in God's faithfulness or responded differently to her neighbors, even though the change brought about by her baptism happened more than eight decades ago.

Yet Paul admonishes the community of faith in Rome to remember their own baptism in a way that will distinguish their lives from the lives of other citizens of that imperial city.

Do not be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

(Romans 12:2)

Paul reminds us that our own lives serve as a kind of public testi-

mony to others. Since baptism creates a new relationship with God, freeing us from the power of sin, death, and the devil, in times of disappointment or crisis or anxiety we really don't need to be scared to death—for we have already died and been raised with Christ Jesus.

God has wrapped the whole of our lives in promises that are stronger than even our greatest fears. That may not seem so significant when all is going well in our lives, but in a time of crisis or doubt there is no better assurance of God's enduring grace.

At the same time, baptism calls us to give our lives away in service to others. We don't have to spend our lifetime accruing accomplishments or wealth to prove that our lives amounted to something. Instead, we are free to care about others in their needs and to care about the whole creation. In Romans 6:22 Paul describes this freedom as an advantage, or a fruit, of our new status before God. But what kind of change is that—loss or gain?

A new direction

We do lose something when we are baptized. We lose responsibility for defining the core of our lives, of having to come up with a good enough reason in God's eyes for living the way that we do. Whatever else we may experience, once we are baptized, we belong to Christ

his death and resurrection now define the very center of our lives—not just sometimes, but all the time. “I am a baptized child of God!” is the truest thing we can ever say about ourselves.

When we look at our face in the mirror each morning, we can delight and give thanks that we do have a purpose in life—God’s purpose. One way to picture this is to imagine that the natural global positioning of our life has been reoriented toward a new homeward direction as our life is united with Christ’s death and resurrection. That reorientation doesn’t remove any of the ordinary challenges we will face as we grow through the years, but in another sense, everything has changed.

Do you know Christians who were baptized as adults? For some, this may have followed on the heels of a life-changing experience. Through such a transformation, they came to see the center of their life and their life’s purpose in a startlingly fresh way. Living through marital strife or serious illness, the move from addiction into recovery, disappointment in one’s educational plans or career, or a near-death experience are often critical times that precipitate a conversion experience and lead to baptism.

If we were baptized as infants or young children, it may seem that such moments of high drama and intensity challenge the life-long

unfolding of baptismal faith. But is the reorientation really different in those two experiences? For both the infant and the adult, this change is brought about by the gracious power of God, creating a new life in Christ.

A transformed life

What does it look like when the gracious power of God is at work in a life? Paul describes the way in which the life of the person reoriented by baptism will increase in maturity.

... We also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

(Romans 5:3–5)

Here the apostle is describing what happens over an extended period of time. Endurance, character, and hope are consequences of a life well lived in this new way. The same grace that removes our need to generate good enough reasons for God to love us now opens our lives to the transformative shaping of God’s presence. Whether we think of this as lifelong faith formation or growth in Christian maturity, this is part of what we mean

when we say we have been changed by baptism.

At the conclusion of his letter to the Romans, Paul writes,

We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor.

(Romans 15:1–2)

Showing such mercy and patience will mean something quite different for the three-year-old and for the octogenarian, but it is one example of the new way of caring for others that we live out when we are changed by baptism.

Think of the most mature Christians you know, no matter what their age. What fruits of this new life do you see in those who have been buried and raised with Christ Jesus? How do they speak of their confidence in the power of God?

Those characteristics, too, describe the change that comes from living out of God’s grace. Those lives—like ours and the life of Apostle Paul himself—give witness day by day to what it means to be changed by baptism. 🌸

The Rev. Patricia Lull is dean of students at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minn., and also volunteers as an affiliated pastor at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in St. Paul. She is grateful for all who continue to bear with her as she grows in her baptismal identity.



LET US PRAY

As we begin the season

of Advent, many of us may find ourselves wrestling with contrasting feelings. There's a sense of eager anticipation and looking forward to the Feast of the Nativity and all that it means. But that anticipation is often mixed with feelings of anxiety: "How will everything get done?" and "Why has this lovely season of the church year become so overloaded with activities and expectations?"

Most of us aspire to finding a balance between such conflicting feelings. We long for peace and for wholeness and we look forward to the coming of One who embodies new life, hope, forgiveness, salvation. We yearn for quiet and for space both within ourselves and without, a place for the coming of God.

For many years, I've turned to the great O Antiphons in this season of Advent. They are favorites of mine because they echo our deepest longings. Like doorways into the heart of God, the O Antiphons invite us to experience the abundant gifts of God's presence. They bring a sense of focus into the busy-ness of this season. As a collage of Old Testament names for the long-awaited One we know as Christ, the O Antiphons reflect

the longing that characterizes our own hunger for God. Most of all, they help create space, a place in our hearts for the coming of Christ.

Meant for the last days of Advent, the O Antiphons were composed in the seventh and eighth centuries by monks who found the Old Testament texts—mostly the psalms and prophecies of Isaiah—to be filled with images of the coming Christ. Perhaps the most familiar version is found in the Advent hymn, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" (ELW 257). You also might enjoy a lovely little book, *Hasten the Kingdom: Praying the O Antiphons of Advent*, by Mary Winifred (Liturgical Press), a prayer service of readings and meditations for individuals or households.

As you make a place for the coming of God this Christmas, may the Christ who is Wisdom, Lord of Light, Spring of Joy, Root of Life, Key of Knowledge, Root of Jesse, Emmanuel—fill your life. O come, O come, Emmanuel. Come to us who wait . . . the troubled, the anxious, and the hopeful. 🌿

Julie K. Ageson is coordinator of ELCA Resource Centers and director of the Resource Center for the Eastern North Dakota Synod. She is a member of Bethesda Lutheran Church in Moorhead, Minn.

You might pray with this shortened version of the O Antiphons:

O Wisdom, who came from the mouth of the most high . . . Come and teach us the way of prudence.

O Lord of Light, who appeared to Moses in the flame of the burning bush . . . Come, light the hearts of all in dark and shadow.

O Spring of Joy, rain down upon our spirits . . . Come, make us whole.

O Root of Life, draw us all to you, our hope reborn in dying and in rising.

O Key of Knowledge, open to us the pathway of peace.

O Root of Jesse, come to deliver us.

O Emmanuel, God with us . . . the expected of the nations, Come to save us, O Lord our God.

Making a Place

by Julie K. Ageson



These are the lyrics
That inspire the kids
That come to the church
That created the recording studio
That started with your investment.

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CALENDAR NOTES

December

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This month marks the beginning of not only a new liturgical season, Advent, but also a new liturgical year, year C, the year of Luke.

Scholars tell us that the third Gospel was written in about the year 80 or 90, after the sack of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple by the Romans in the year 70. The first audience of this Gospel would have known this history as they listened to this beautifully constructed Gospel that refers to Jerusalem and the Temple over and over again. I suspect the memory of that beloved holy city and all the prophecies attached to it added to this Gospel's importance in the early years of the church.

6 Second Sunday of Advent

Today's prayer of the day begins, "Stir up our hearts, Lord God, to prepare the way of your only Son." What does it mean to prepare the way? How do we live like that? The Scripture passages appointed for today are Malachi 3:1-4 or Baruch 5:1-9; Luke 1:68-79 (this Gospel canticle is called for in place of a selection from the book of Psalms); Philippians 1:3-11; and Luke 3:1-6.

6 Nicholas, bishop of Myra

Little is known for certain of this fourth-century bishop, but he lives on in legend and folklore. He died on this date in the year 343.

13 Third Sunday of Advent

The prayer of the day for this third Sunday of Advent begins, "Stir up the wills

of your faithful people, Lord God, and open our ears to the preaching of John. We always hear from John the Baptist during Advent, calling us all to change our ways. The texts appointed for today are Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; and Luke 3:7-18.

17 O Wisdom

The O Antiphons (see "Let Us Pray" page 10) have long been sung with Mary's song, the Magnificat, at Evening Prayer during this last week of Advent. *Sundays and Seasons* 2010 includes a lovely Advent Lessons and Carols service based on the O Antiphons. Today we sing O come, O Wisdom.

18 O Adonai

Today we sing O come, O Lord of might. The Hebrew name Adonai (master, lord, the Lord) is often used in Scripture instead of the unpronounceable proper name of God. It is represented in our English-language Bibles as LORD.

19 O Root of Jesse

Today we sing, O come, O Branch of Jesse. What does that mean? Jesse of Bethlehem (see 1 Samuel 16) was the father of King David and thus an ancestor of Jesus. Why a root or branch? Think of a family tree.

20 Fourth Sunday of Advent

The prayer of the day today begins, "Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come" and the O Antiphon is O Key of David. In today's Gospel, we hear Mary's song

of what the world will be like when the long-awaited Messiah comes in power. The texts appointed for today are Micah 5:2–5a; Psalm 80:1–7 or Luke 1:46b–55 (Mary’s canticle may be used here in place of the psalm); Hebrews 10:5–10; Luke 1:39–45 [46–55].

20 Katharina von Bora Luther, renewer of the church

This bold woman would have known Mary’s Magnificat by heart, having sung it at Evening Prayer every night in the convent where she was educated from an early age. She lived in hope for the liberation of God’s people, just as the prophet Anna had (see “Active Waiting” on page 14 for more).

21 O Dayspring

Here in the darkest part of winter, we are all eager to see the days begin to lengthen again. The ancients who saw God’s word written in God’s creation understood the growing daylight as a sign of the coming of Christ.

22 O King of Nations

The ancients understood the king as not just a political ruler, but as a link between the people and God. This long-awaited King will be a link between *all* peoples and God.

23 O Emmanuel

O come, Emmanuel, God-with-us!

24 Nativity of Our Lord Christmas Eve

Advent fades away and the season of Christmas arrives as evening falls and the silent stars go by. What’s your favorite Christmas Eve carol? Mine is “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” I think it’s a beautiful poem, and the tune goes so well with the text. The Scripture passages appointed for Christmas Eve are Isaiah 9:2–7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11–14; and Luke 2:1–14 [15–20].

25 Nativity of Our Lord Christmas Day

The two Gospel passages that may be proclaimed today present Christ coming among us from two different angles. The text from Luke shows us the baby in a manger, the child of a poor couple who could find no room in the inn and so was born in a stable. The text from John shows us the Word, who was with God and who was God. And yet they are talking about the same Jesus Christ. The texts suggested for Christmas Day are (set II) Isaiah 62:6–12; Psalm 97; Titus 3:4–7; and Luke 2:[1–7] 8–20; and (set III) Isaiah 52:7–10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1:1–4 [5–12]; and John 1:1–14.

26 Stephen, deacon and martyr

If you have time, you might read the whole fascinating story of Stephen (Acts 6:8–7:60). The texts appointed for the feast are 2 Chron-

icles 24:17–22; Psalm 17:1–9, 15; Acts 6:8–7:2a, 51–60; Matthew 23:34–39.

27 First Sunday of Christmas

Christmas isn’t over; we celebrate it for 12 days! On this first Sunday of the season, we see two scriptural pictures of children serving the Lord in the Temple, growing up in divine and human favor. Samuel grew up to be a great prophet—and we know what Jesus grew up to be. The readings for today are 1 Samuel 2:18–20, 26; Psalm 148; Colossians 3:12–17; Luke 2:41–52.

28 The Holy Innocents, martyrs

The prayer of the day calls on God to frustrate “the designs of evil tyrants” and establish the divine reign of “justice, love, and peace.” Amen, amen! The texts appointed for the commemoration of the Holy Innocents are Jeremiah 31:15–17; Psalm 124, 1 Peter 4:12–19; Matthew 2:13–18.

29 John, apostle and evangelist (transferred)

John’s day is ordinarily celebrated on the 27th, but the First Sunday of Christmas fell on that date this year. So it is transferred. The texts for John’s feast are Genesis 1:1–5, 26–31; Psalm 116:12–19; 1 John 1:1–2:2; John 21:20–25.



Active Waiting

by Elyse Nelson Winger

A midrash on Luke 2:36–38

Midrash: a story that explains a biblical text from an ethical or devotional point of view.

Sabbath day in the women's section of our synagogue wouldn't have been the same without Anna. Any day would have been different without her. She *was* the women's section, body and soul. Anna had this holy presence, and she lived in the present. And she spoke with prophetic power. She was our Deborah, our Miriam, our Huldah. It was as if her father's name, Phanuel (meaning *face of God*), was incarnated in her. You know nothing of her words of wisdom and hope, and I am sorry for that. But know this: She spent a lifetime waiting—actively waiting—and near the end of her life, she saw what she had been waiting for.

Anna was married as young as a girl could be, “from her virginity,” it's been said, meaning she was about 12. She spent her blossoming years wedded to a man who died too soon. She spent the remainder of her years worshiping and fasting, conversing with all of us, mothering the children she'd never had.

Anna was of the tribe of Asher, one of Jacob's sons born to Leah's maid Zilpah. Leah named the child Asher, or *fortunate*, for she trusted that despite waiting a lifetime for the love of her husband, Jacob, others already knew how fortunate she was to have co-mothered so many children.

Anna knew Leah's story and lived with her foremother's hope, though for something much greater even than a husband's love. She lived awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem. But know this: She waited *not* by staying put and silent, but by proclaiming and praying, by caring and confessing. Anna was a prophet! And when she finally saw what she had been waiting for—this tiny dependent child named Jesus, the one about whom her friend Simeon sang so sweetly—Anna never stopped singing Jesus' praises.

The month of December ushers in Advent and Christmas, and invites us to meet again the women (like Anna) and men who awaited Christ's coming, even as we wait Christ's coming again. I am grateful to the Jewish tradition of midrash. It offers faithful imagining—stories behind and around the biblical stories—that open a path into the living word where our foremothers can be known better.

We often don't get much to work with: Anna commands only three verses of Scripture. Yet in these verses we meet a prophet who models what a life of active waiting can yet be for us. In this season of promise and incarnation, how might we reclaim the power of active waiting in our lives, for this world, in God's name?

In *Finding My Way Home: Pathways to Life and the Spirit*, Henri Nouwen, the late spiritual guide, writes: “Most of us consider waiting as something very passive, a hopeless state determined by events totally out of our hands. The bus is late? We cannot do anything about it, so we have

to sit there and just wait. It is not difficult to understand the irritation people feel when somebody says, 'Just wait.' Words like that push us into passivity.

"But there is none of this passivity in Scripture. Those who are waiting are waiting very actively. They know that what they are waiting for is growing from the ground on which they are standing. Right here is a secret for us about waiting. If we wait in the conviction that a seed has been planted and that something has already begun, it changes the way we wait. Active waiting implies being fully present to the moment with the conviction that something is happening where we are and that we want to be present to it."

Advent has the power to restore our attention to the present. Our Advent lectionary texts are popping with proclamations about being alive and awake in the moment, ready to welcome the face of God both in Christ and in one another. Nouwen lists Anna as such a person, and he's wise to include her name. Anna had joined the vulner-

able ranks of orphans and widows at a young age. We might think that Luke exaggerates her "night and day" presence in the Temple, but chances are that Anna really did live at the Temple and was part of the community of the poor (the *anawim*) so lifted up in Luke's Gospel. Anna, known for her family lineage, a daughter of a remembered father, was still a homeless widow awaiting a promise. She prayed and practiced hope as she waited, so much so that she became known as the Prophet Anna.

Living out the promise

To our contemporary senses, Anna's way may seem impossibly archaic. Are we supposed to pick a pew, plop down, and produce 'round the clock prayer? Probably not. Anna made the most of her life options as a poor widow, and used her time and her voice in the most public and prophetic ways possible. She, like others, was waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Anna knew the promise, the seed of it planted by the prophets before her, and for her, every moment was a moment full of the promise of redemption.

The way I imagine it, Anna figured she might as well start praying and serving like the redeemed woman she was already becoming! She might as well start being and incarnating her father's name, *face of*

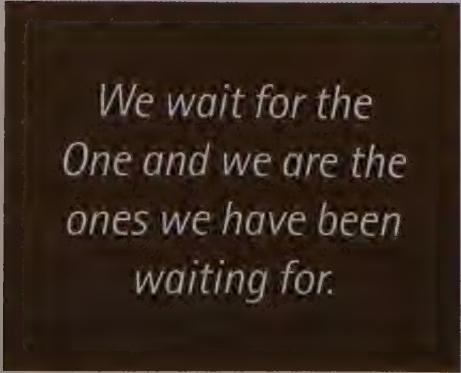
God, so that others would be able to hear in her words the truth of God's holy promises.

Anna waited. But she was already living in and living out the promise she was awaiting. That's the key for Anna and for us. The practice of active waiting lives in this promise: "We wait for the One *and* we are the ones we have been waiting for." Think of it like "law *and* gospel" or "saint *and* sinner" or "free *and* bound." We cannot point to the reality of God and the truth of our condition and calling without these terms in tension and conversation. The same is true here: We wait for the One and we are the ones.

Called and equipped

"We are the ones we have been waiting for." I first saw those words in 2006 at the ELCA Youth Gathering in San Antonio. They were printed in white on the black T-shirts worn by Lutheran teenagers gleaming with purpose.

I later learned that this phrase originated with the South African poet June Jordan, written for women as encouragement to fight apartheid and build a just society. (It is also the title of one of Alice Walker's books and has inspired our current president.) Jordan's poetry is potent with possibility for many people in many places. But what spoke to me immediately—and what I think was inspiring kids (and this tired chap-



*We wait for the
One and we are the
ones we have been
waiting for.*

erone) to shell out 10 bucks to wear it—was the pronouncement that we are part of a promise and we are called and equipped to be Christ in this world.

The biblical scholar Raymond Brown notes that in his portrayal of the prophet Anna, Luke is “anticipating the atmosphere of Pentecost,” foreshadowing the coming down of the Spirit on all flesh, when daughters and sons shall prophesy. And where do we celebrate the Spirit’s coming down? In baptism.

“We are the ones we have been waiting for” because from the moment water in three doses doused our heads, from the moment oil in cruciform strokes soaked into our foreheads, from the moment fire joined fire in paschal candle and baptismal taper, we were welcomed into a life of faithful waiting and faithful action.

A time to wait

The prophet Anna didn’t live a simple, pain-free life. None of us do. And while the book of Ecclesiastes doesn’t include this exact phrase in its famous poem, it must be true: There is a time to wait. And the way we wait makes all the difference. The way we wait, as baptized and called children of God, begins in knowing that we are a part of a promise that is now *and* not yet, seed *and* flower, Christ with us *and* Christ coming again.

I know another widow who waited. She spent years incarcerated, awaiting release and awaiting redemption. She waited, but not like someone at a bus stop, not like a passive nobody without a plan. Her waiting was active, enlivened at times by the wonder and sheer gift of God’s forgiveness and grace. As she awaited release, she reclaimed her vocation.

While in prison, this widow used her God-given gifts as a musician and teacher. She tutored women as they prepared for their GEDs. She shared music with those who worshiped in the chapel. She became and received strength from peers devastated by tragedy that led to their own prison time. She actively awaited release from the state and from her own sorrow.

And the way she waited, centered in the cross of Christ, allowed those of us who loved her to wait as well. We waited for mercy, for compassion, for reunion. During those years, we started families and new jobs; we made moves and missed what had been.

During those years, we experienced what can only be the mystery of grace and forgiveness that led to reunion and an ongoing process of reconciliation and relationship. We know that we are part of what Nouwen described as that planted seed, in process, becoming, awaiting the full promise of redemption.

Wake up!...and wait

One of the privileges and blessings of serving as a pastor is presiding at baptism. And on a recent Sunday, I was struck with the spirituality of active waiting alive in the baptismal rite. There we were: pastor, family, and sponsors in a semicircle around a font, welcoming a wee one into this life of faith, grace, and service. And in baptizing this tiny dependent child, we committed ourselves to awaiting the ways in which he would grow to know and trust God, to care for others, to work for justice and peace.

And yet, already this small child—with his bright eyes sparkling with each baptismal shell-full of water—stirred in us hope and confirmation that love is truly the only force for healing in our battered world.

In this baptism, like all others, I found myself remembering again that it is worth actively awaiting Christ’s coming again when death and doom will be swallowed up forever and when, by God’s grace alone, all—and I mean all—will see God face to face.

Where do you find yourself waiting this Advent season? How will you wait for the One, knowing that by baptism you are one of the ones the world is waiting for? 🌸

The Rev. Elyse Nelson Winger serves as associate pastor for worship and music at St. John’s Lutheran in Bloomington, Ill.



HEALTH WISE

Is the Recession Harming Your Health?

by Molly M. Ginty

Dee Brassell said she never expected to rely on public aid. But this 57-year-old single mother in Bridgeport, Conn., never expected to lose her 10-year job as a beverage company analyst, a position that had earned her a comfortable \$58,000 a year. Then she was laid off in June 2008.

"With my savings and severance nearly gone and with my unemployment benefits running out this month, I don't have money left to pay for health insurance," says Brassell. "I've just applied for Medicaid and can only pray that I qualify. Even though I don't have any serious health conditions, I'm nervous about going without the checkups and maintenance care that I need."

As the United States faces its worst economic crisis in decades, Brassell is far from alone. Some 46 million Americans are without health insurance. Unemployment is hovering near 9 percent, and if it spikes to 10 percent, an estimated 13.2 million more people will lose their employer-sponsored coverage.

Health wise, who will be hardest hit? Studies indicate that the answer is women, who are already more likely than men to need ongoing medical treatment and to skip or skimp on that treatment because of costs.

"Women are in greater danger of losing health coverage because they are more likely to be self-employed, work part time, have low-paying, no-benefit jobs, and rely on their spouses for coverage," says Dr. Susan Hasti of Physicians for a National Health Program.

The fact that women earn just 78 cents on the dollar compared to men makes it especially difficult for women to afford private insurance, which averages an annual \$4,704 for individuals and \$12,680 for families. And due to a practice known as "gender rating," most private insurers charge women more than they charge men, according to the National Women's Law Center.

If you lose your job and your health insurance, your first safety net is COBRA (the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1985), which allows laid-off workers and their dependents to remain on their former employer's group health plan for 18 months, paying the same amount for coverage that their employer once did.

COBRA is available to both individuals and families. But it can cost \$380 to \$1,020 a month—nearly as much as many peoples' unemployment payments. Congress recently passed legislation to ease this burden so recently-laid-off workers only have to pay 35 percent of the normal cost of COBRA. But even with this boost, problems with the program persist. Many laid-off women are eligible for COBRA but don't sign up for it because, like Dee Brassell, they can't afford to pay for it and pay their bills, too. Others don't qualify because they earned more than \$125,000 per individual or \$250,000 per family annually—or were laid off from companies that had fewer than 20 employees.

For women who can't get or who have exhausted COBRA coverage, Med

This ongoing column is part of the Women of the ELCA health initiative, Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls. Visit www.womenoftheelca.org for more information.

Medicaid is a second recourse. Congress recently strengthened this safety net, too, temporarily setting aside \$87 billion to increase the federal share of Medicaid costs. But this second program also has its drawbacks. Many women don't qualify for Medicaid because they do not have dependent children. "Also, the income threshold can be very low," says Cindy Pearson, executive director of the National Women's Health Network. "In some states, you make too much money for Medicaid if you are at the poverty line."

The good news is that legislators are working to reform health care and

help the growing number of Americans who are losing coverage. At press time, Congress was considering 12 separate health-care proposals, with the three leading plans all recommending that the U.S. expand Medicaid and make both private and employer-sponsored coverage more affordable and with President Obama pushing for public insurance to help the needy.

While Americans wait for their government to act, how can you help secure affordable health care insurance for yourself and your family? Health advocates recommend the following:

- Checking whether your private or employer-sponsored coverage has options that are less expensive for your needs.
- Making sure that if you do temporarily lose your health coverage, you don't go more than 63 days without some kind of insurance, which could disqualify you for private or employer-sponsored coverage for up to a full year afterward.
- Checking with government authorities to learn more about state health insurance programs, Medicaid, COBRA, and "mini COBRA" laws in 30 states that extend coverage to laid-off workers from companies with fewer than 20 employees.
- Putting your spouse or partner on your health-insurance plan—or vice versa—if one of your jobs is more secure and if this will save you money in the long run. 🌸



Molly Ginty lives in New York. Her work has appeared in *Women's eNews*, *Marie Claire*, *Redbook*, and *Ms*.

The 2003 ELCA Churchwide Assembly adopted a social statement on health and health care. To learn more, go to www.elca.org and search for "health social statement."

For more information:

United States Department of Labor: COBRA
www.dol.gov/ebsa/faqs/faq_consumer_cobra.HTML

United States Department of Health and Human Services: Medicaid
www.cms.hhs.gov/MedicaidGenInfo/

Kaiser Family Foundation: Health Coverage & the Uninsured
www.kff.org/uninsured/index.cfm



WE RECOMMEND

Resources for action, advocacy, programs, or further study

Compiled from sources including the ELCA News Service, Seeds for the Parish, and www.elca.org

ELCA Web site offers Advent resources

Are you looking for program, events, or resource ideas for Advent? The ELCA Web site is full of them.

WORLD HUNGER: Ways to encourage members of your congregation to give “alternative gifts” for Christmas top the list on the ELCA World Hunger page. The site offers World Hunger stories and points you to the ELCA Good Gifts page where you can find more ways to give alternative gifts. Go to www.elca.org/hunger and click on “resources,” then “for congregations,” then “Advent and Christmas resources.”

WORSHIP: The principal themes of Advent are hope, darkness and light, repentance, watchfulness, preparation, expectation of the incarnation of Christ, and anticipation of the fullness of time at Christ’s second coming. Learn about the colors of Advent, what to do at home to demonstrate the meaning of the season to children, and more about mid-week prayer on the ELCA’s worship pages. Go to www.elca.org/worship, then click on “planning,” and “Advent.”

EDUCATION: Do you teach Sunday school? If you do, you can find instructional information on the ELCA and Education pages. You can teach the children about how hope, love, joy, and peace fit into the season of Advent. Visit www.elca.org/education, then click on “Preschool-Grade 12,” then “Resources,” and “Teacher Resources.”

WOMEN OF THE ELCA: Download a new resource for Advent by Christa von Zychlin, author of *Lutheran Woman Today’s*

2009 summer Bible study on Mary. The Advent resource is one of many offered for free download on the site. Visit www.womenoftheelca.org, and click on “New Program Resources for 2009.”

Stay in touch in the comfort of your home

If you have a computer, you can stay connected to Women of the ELCA Café, and *Lutheran Woman Today* in several ways. Both Women of the ELCA and *LWT* have Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, and blogs (Web logs). Café has a Facebook page.

Do these sound like foreign words to you? They shouldn’t. Members of older generations are joining social networking sites by the thousands. The 2009 Facebook Demographics and Statistics Report claimed a 276 percent growth in 35- to 54-year-old users. The number of people 55 and older who use Facebook has grown by 194 percent.

The best way to understand these social media tools is just to jump in and try them. Go to www.facebook.com and sign up. Then search for *Lutheran Woman Today*, Café, and Women of the ELCA and become a fan. To find our blogs, visit www.elca.org/blog. There you can see several ELCA blogs, including ours.

On Twitter people write short updates called “tweets,” of 140 characters or fewer. After signing up for a Twitter account (www.twitter.com), use the search word “Lutheran” or “ELCA” to see all the Lutherans who are “tweeting.” These new social media tools can help you stay in touch with friends and family.

Women of the ELCA gift items, resources on sale

SILK SCARF \$8

Swirled hues of blue provide the canvas for soft hints of the Women of the ELCA logo. Silk. Made in India.

Item: 9786000204662



BREAD WARMER AND BASKET \$6

A whitewashed terra cotta bread warmer (comes with cord for hanging) bears the Women of the ELCA logo. Palm leaf bread basket is 9-1/2" in diameter and 3" high. Made in Bangladesh.

Item: 9786000204631



WOMEN OF THE ELCA TOTE \$6

Brightly colored Guatemalan fabric embroidered with the Women of the ELCA logo on the outside pocket.

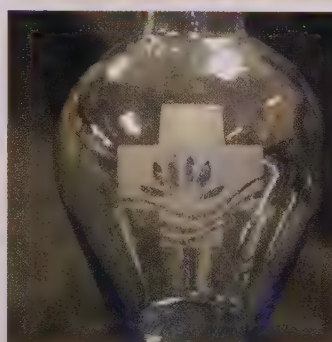
Item: 9786000206147



GLASS VASE \$10

A stylish, hand-blown vase that will brighten up any space. Women of the ELCA cross and lily is etched in glass. 4" in diameter and 7" high. Made in Guatemala.

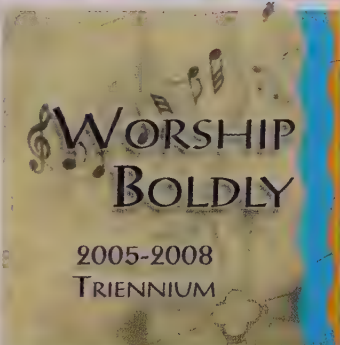
Item: 9786000204600



WORSHIP BOLDLY \$2 10 for \$15, 25 for \$25

A worship resource especially for Women of the ELCA with more than 40 songs and canticles, plus worship services. Includes prayers for special occasions.

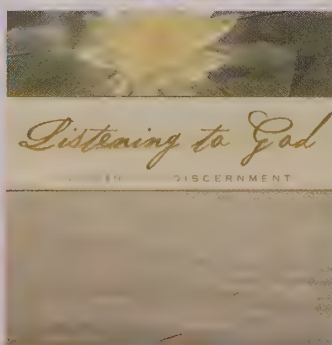
Item: 9786000204525



LISTENING TO GOD: A GUIDE TO DISCERNMENT \$4

Six flexible, hour-long sessions explore what it means to discern God's hopes and desires for life and what their God-given gifts are for ministry within a congregation or community.

Item: 9786000193768



LIVING FROM THE HEART OF GOD \$5

A journal for women of all ages offering reflections, devotions, and prayers on the many life stages and experiences of women. Each section also includes space for readers to record their own thoughts.

Item: 9786000219598

Living from the Heart of God
A Journal for Life's Stages



DENIM SHIRT \$18

One of our most requested items! Lightweight denim embroidered with the Women of the ELCA logo. 100% cotton. Sizes available: S, M, L, XL, XXL

Item: 9786000206123



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Women of the
ELCA 

KEEPING THE FAITH IN TIMES OF



It was known as the seminarian's prayer among the students at the seminary where I worked some years ago: "Lord, save me from yet another learning experience. Amen." Let me say that again: Amen! I've always loved that short prayer, and can't even guess how many times I've uttered it over the years. Those words—"learning experience" are often a synonym for the word "change." Although I recognize that I've grown and learned a great deal from all of the transitions in my life, sometimes I'd be just as

happy to have the world stay the same today as it was yesterday.

Over the last five years, there has been more change in my life than I can remember in any other five-year span. It started with a move to a new home. A beloved cat died, and then a second one. I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. I got engaged and then married, moved to a second new home, and became a step-parent—my first parenting experience—at age 49. Then I left my full-time job to write and lead retreats. After writing a book

on living in covenant with our pets, I recognized a call to care for animals and started working in a veterinary practice. I then left that to open my own pet-sitting business a few months before the country slumped into a major recession. Then about a year later, my husband was laid off from his job, leaving us with a loss of income and our health insurance coverage.

That's enough change in my book. I've had more than enough learning experiences for now. Like the Israelites wandering the desert

HANGE



after fleeing their Egyptian slave-masters, I definitely have days when Egypt—despite whatever miseries it held—looks more appealing than the journey into the unknown.

I suspect that you, no matter who you are, have some of those days too. If you're not living through transitions in your personal circumstances, the world around us offers plenty of upheaval. The unsettled economy affects us all. The political instability of various parts of the world is downright scary. Even the churches we attend—the places we

thought would never change, and maybe even *counted on* to stay stable in the midst of the world's chaos—are wrestling with new ideas and new ways of doing things.

JOURNEY IN THE WILDERNESS

Learning experiences abound in today's world, and I don't see much evidence that they'll disappear anytime soon. Aside from those days when I'm looking fondly back at my own Egypt, I have to admit that the changes in my world have actually helped me grow and—I

hope—become more of the person God calls me to be. The multiple sclerosis taught me to slow down and pay more attention to what really matters. The deaths of my cats helped me empathize with others and help them through difficult decisions with their own pets. Getting married, learning a little about parenting, and opening my own business, while hard work in so many ways, have also brought great gifts into my life.

My husband and I are struggling to grow the pet-sitting business to a

level that will pay for our household expenses and health insurance, but we're doing it together, and at least we can't be laid off. On those days when Egypt looks better to me than whatever lies ahead, I have to remind myself that God hasn't called me to a stationary life. God has invited me to continue to listen for and act on the fullness of whatever it is that God calls me to be.

If you, too, are struggling with shifts in your world, let me offer some bits of wisdom I've gleaned from the stories of the Israelite exodus from Egypt and their long journey through wilderness times. If there's any group that understands how tough transition is, it's the Israelites. They were experts.

> Expect change to be hard.

Knowing that the twists and turns will be difficult to navigate—that they're not intended to be easy—helps me be a bit more patient with the shifting landscape. Biblical scholar Terence Fretheim, in his commentary on Exodus, wrote about how hard it was for the Hebrews to stop knowing themselves as slaves in Egypt and become, instead, the people of God. They spent 40-plus years working on that, and many of those who had lived a life of slavery never did make the transition to a new life.

Maybe the changes in my life and in yours won't be as dramatic

as what the Israelites faced, but then again, they might. New ideas, new ways of doing things, and living under changing rules and circumstances will be tough. God is okay with our grouching about it sometimes, as well as with our tears and frustration. God listened to the Israelites worry about food and water in the desert, and God provided those things that they really needed. In the midst of our own desert journeys, we each have to watch for the manna that God provides and find the courage to take it, to stop asking to go back to Egypt, and start moving forward.

> Eat, drink, sleep, and stretch.

Living in the midst of transition takes an enormous physical toll on the body. Getting through the process goes more easily if we take good care of the frame that carries us around. In the midst of changing times, pay attention to consuming healthy foods and beverages, to getting plenty of rest, and to whatever kind of exercise helps you shed stress. Subsisting on fatty and sugary food and drink, eating too much or too little, sleeping too few hours each night, and being sedentary are all guaranteed to make navigating changing circumstances more painful.

God gave the Israelites the food and water they needed, and commanded them to rest from all that

walking, not only on the Sabbath but at other times as well. It was a good prescription then and it remains so today.

> Give your imagination room to play.

Reading through the book of Exodus, I get the sense that many of those trekking through the desert were walking with their heads on backwards. Every time they hit a bump in the path they bemoaned the fact that they'd ever left that "kinder and gentler" life of slavery. In the midst of forging through new and strange territory, the known behind us always looks better than the unknown in front.

There are times when what we left was, in fact, very good. Maybe you've lost a beloved spouse or friend, or a program or service once offered at your church or other organization that you'll miss with all your heart. We need to mourn those very real losses, but there also comes a time, as Ecclesiastes 3:4 reminds us, when it's time to dance. At some point, God calls us to recognize that what is ahead of us may also be good and worthy of consideration, and even, ultimately, celebration.

The Israelites got caught in this situation at the edge of Canaan. The spies sent in to check out that land first reported that the land flowed with milk and honey, and produced good fruit. But, the spies quickly

added (there's always a "but"), there were also strong people who could easily defeat the Israelites.

Caleb, one of the younger spies, asserted that any obstacles would be overcome with God's help, but the older spies continued to let their anxieties about change get the best of them. The strong people became giants that would step on the Israelites as if they were grasshoppers.

In the end, the Israelites allowed themselves to be swayed by the timid spies' exaggerated stories. Their fears about all the bad things that might happen overwhelmed the promises that God had been making to them for decades. They were not done mourning Egypt, so they could not move into the land God promised them.

Though it is challenging, one of the tasks of transitional times is to imagine what gifts the future might bring, instead of letting our fears get the best of us.

> Try a little humility.

It's a well-used phrase: "But we've always done it that way." Those words come with an unspoken addendum: "We should keep doing it that way." Whenever I find myself using that word *should*, I know I'm getting in trouble; I'm judging something or someone, sometimes even myself.

I learned this good lesson years ago from a wonderful pastor. After

a sermon he preached, I complained to him that I felt guilty about not being able to do all that he was suggesting—or at least not in the way that I thought I should. He knew me well, however, and he knew that I accomplished the same goals, just in a different way. After listening to my worries, he looked me straight in the eye and asked a question I've never forgotten: "So you think God gave you the wrong gifts?" So much for second-guessing God!

I have to remind myself often that I don't know what God's plans are for me, much less for those around me or in the world as a whole. A few teaspoons of humility can help me be open to what change might bring. Refusing to open myself to the possibility that God is behind change leaves me at the border of the Promised Land, listening to the voices of fear, rather than to those who have glimpsed a new and wonderful future God has invited us to experience.

STEPPING OUT IN FAITH

I don't mean to make this all sound simple; it isn't. With my husband's job loss last year, there have been more than a few sleepless nights. In recent months we've had to decide if we continue seeking that elusive full-time job (that might bring both income and health insurance) or commit ourselves wholeheartedly to the pet-sitting business and trust

that God has guided us here for a reason and will give us the resources we need to make this work. A phone call or letter from God telling us which road to take would be welcome right about now—but so far nothing has appeared.

So we have talked, prayed, and listened, and we have committed ourselves to the business that seems to be our path right now. We're living on a much smaller income than we used to have and working harder for less pay, at least for now.

But we love the work, and we're learning new things every day. So we're moving forward with a combination of caution and optimism, and even great enthusiasm some days, in hopes that we have listened well for God's invitation and guidance, and that what is ahead, like the land God called the Israelites to, will be good.

If that turns out to be the wrong decision, we'll start listening and praying all over again, and try to do a better job next time. Change is like that, and few decisions are final while we navigate the desert spaces toward an unknown future. All we really know is that God walks with us, comforting *and* challenging us as we journey, and that is more than enough. Thanks be to God. 🌿

Debra K. Farrington is the author of eight books, including *The Seasons of a Restless Heart: A Spiritual Companion for Living in Transition*.

The gift of Bible study

by Audrey West

A plain cardboard box lies deep within the linen closet in my parents' house. Every few years, somebody in the family rediscovers the box, and we haul it out to examine the treasures inside: a photo of my mother at age 15 proudly holding the skin of a rattlesnake; a trumpet mouthpiece, dented and tarnished, that belonged to my grandmother; pictures of my great-grandparents, whom I never knew, but whose features I see in the faces of the nieces and nephews who clamor around as we sort through this cache of family treasures—letters, poems, and mementos from distant times and places.

As we pull each item from the box, somebody tells its story. How my mother and her friend, after a brief skirmish with a rattlesnake that involved several very large rocks, skinned the snake and produced a handsome belt; how my grandmother used to sneak into the barn to play her brother's trumpet because her parents thought trumpet-playing was unbecoming of a proper young lady; how my great-grandmother's parents challenged convention by sending their daughters to college in the 1890s. Sometimes we argue about the details. Occasionally we cannot recall the exact circumstances behind a particular memento, and so we imagine the story that would be told if it had belonged to one of us.

The box and its contents are a gift from our ancestors, reminding us who we are and to which family we belong. As we tell the stories and share a sense of kinship with one another, we remember that so much of who we are and how we engage the world is shaped by people who are other than us, and yet their hearts and minds have become integrated into our own. We learn what it means to be part of this particular family, and how we are gifted by the collective experience represented by the items in the box.

The gift of story

Each month, when women throughout the church gather to study the Bible, we open a gift from our spiritual ancestors, whose stories, poetry, laments, and other writings are contained within its covers. We follow the adventures of Sarah and Abraham, and the generations that followed them—Rebekah and Isaac, Rachel and Jacob (and Leah), and their children—and we note that our faithful forebears' lives were sometimes exemplary and sometimes not. We experience with them betrayals and disappointment, anguish and fear, joy and celebration, and we learn how their stories shape the whole people of God.

We wander with Moses and the Israelites for 40 years before they reach God's promised land,



or we journey with Jesus to Jerusalem, and we are reminded that following the way of the Lord requires trust and perseverance, and sometimes a lot of struggle. We imagine ourselves being forced from our homes during the Babylonian Exile, and we wonder where God might be in that devastating experience. We cry with the psalmist at the apparent absence of God, and then rejoice with hymns of praise that

God is ever faithful, even in the face of our doubts, uncertainties, tears, despair, and anger.

As we study these writings, learning about their authors, the cultures they reflect, the messages they convey, and the theologies they embrace, we also learn about ourselves. The stories become our stories. Gathering to read and study these texts is a little like receiving a gift box from the family and being

reintroduced to the long-lost cousins whose pictures we find within.

The gift of fellowship

The Apostle Paul writes to Philemon, "I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love" (Philemon 1:7). He tells the Philippians that he is praying for them constantly, "because of your sharing (*koinonia*) in the gospel from the first day until now" (Philippians

1:5). Paul did not have the benefit of meeting in a monthly Women of the ELCA group, but it sounds like he had similar experiences. And his letters may be the next best thing to being there. Through those writings he reaffirms the fellowship that he and his congregations have shared. Paul encourages them (Philippians 1:6), prays for them (1 Thessalonians 1:2), challenges them (Galatians 1:6), reveals emotions to them (2 Corinthians 2:4), eats with them (1 Corinthians 10:6), teaches them (1 Corinthians 4:17), shares his story with them (Galatians 1:13–24), disagrees with them (1 Corinthians 6:7–8), and interprets Scripture with them (Galatians 4:30). The connection between Paul and his fellow believers is forged in their shared experiences and common commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul's fellow Christians do not always agree with him, and sometimes their disagreements are quite heated. But if we learn anything from our careful study of the Bible—or from our experience of studying the Bible with other people—we learn that faithful people of God do not always see things the same way. We should not be surprised. After all, there are two Creation narratives in Genesis and two accounts of the Flood.

Luke acknowledges that others have already written about

Jesus, but he is writing “an orderly account” (Luke 1:3), implying, perhaps, that he wants to say things differently. And anyone who reads the Gospel of Mark all the way through in one sitting will discern an image of the disciples unlike the images found in Matthew or John.

One of the exciting elements about studying the Bible in a group is the differing perspectives that frequently emerge. I learn something new every time I participate in a Bible study, whether I am a leader or a participant.

What a gift it is to have a safe space in community to ask questions, share insights, or struggle together to comprehend a difficult point of view.

The gift of the “other”

Included in my family's box is a small envelope of pictures of relatives standing at landmarks around the world: my father in front of the Great Wall of China, a cousin at the Taj Mahal, my grandmother beside an Alaskan glacier, my aunt at an Italian market. Their reasons for travel varied, from vacation to military service, but I suspect that my relatives shared a sense of adventure and wonder—and not a little culture shock—at experiencing places so very different from their own hometowns. Do you ever have those feelings when you study the Scriptures? I hope so!

One of the gifts of the women's Bible study is the opportunity to visit other lands and meet the people there, even while gathering in a neighbor's living room or the church basement. Guided by our study authors, we enter into a cross-cultural encounter with the languages and cultures of the ancient Near East, first-century Palestine, and Asia Minor. We learn about levirate marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5) and Jewish dietary laws (Leviticus 11) as we study Hebrew poetry (as in the Psalms) and Greco-Roman hymns (Philippians 2).

As we get to know the biblical “others” who lived within these ancient cultures, our eyes are opened to the contemporary “others” who share our own time and place. We may not be able to capture the experience with a photograph, but it is an adventure worth remembering and sharing with the people we love.

The gift of wholeness

Speaking through the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord makes a promise: “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and they will be their God and they will be my people” (Jeremiah 31:33). This prophecy reminds us that God's word is not simply a thing to be studied at arm's length, but something to be integrated into the core of our being, as vital to life as a beat

ing heart. Thus, when good scholarship meets the real lives of study participants, something wonderful happens. We are invited to bridge the gap between head and heart, to think critically and feel passionately, to seek understanding about our faith, to become ever more thoughtful believers, to live into the wholeness that God desires for us.

At times our close study of the Bible will affirm our beliefs, and at times it will challenge them. In either case, we trust that God is working within and among us to bring about God's good purpose. As we study the Bible together—sharing our viewpoints, discovering new insights, and challenging one another—we grow in our faith, that we ourselves might become “a letter of Christ . . . written not with ink but with the spirit of the living God, not in tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (2 Corinthians 3:2). This is not a letter to be stowed away in a box in the back of the linen closet, but one that is lived out in the everyday flesh and blood realities of our lives.

The gift of Jesus Christ


At Christmastime especially we are reminded of God's gift to us in the person of Jesus Christ: born in Bethlehem, the Light of the world. It is said that Martin Luther called the Old and New Testaments “the cradle of Christ,” an image that sug-

gests, among other things, that even as the infant was laid in a manger, so the gospel is nurtured and protected within the pages of our Bibles—but it is not confined there.

Like the shepherds and Magi who gathered around the baby Jesus, we learn more about God's gift as we draw nearer to him. When our studies bring us closer to the Bible, we begin to hear and see details of the text that we might not have noticed before; for example, that the Old Testament sometimes portrays God in female images (Hosea 13:8; Isaiah 66:13); that women are among the first preachers (see, for example, John 4:25–29; Luke 24:22–24); that they supported Jesus' ministry (Luke 8:1–3) and held leadership roles in Paul's churches (Romans 16:3). We want to know more about the lives of women in biblical times and in the experience of the early church.

We ask questions that expand our understanding of God (for example, “What might we learn about God from the parable of the woman and the lost coin?”). We become more fluent in the language of faith, conversant with biblical words and images that help us express our deepest beliefs and guide our most important choices. Along the way, we become the yeast that leavens our churches, impacting councils and boards and helping to shape churchwide discussions

about matters of life and faith. As we gather, learn, explore, discuss, question, and share in our study of the Bible, we grow in our relationships with one another and in our relationship with Jesus. Not only are we the recipients of wonderful gifts left to us by our forebears, but we pass along to future generations the most precious gift of all: the life-saving love of God that comes to the world through God's only begotten Son, Jesus.

Perhaps, one day, our descendants in the faith might be able to say of us, as Paul said of the Thessalonians, “For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it” (1 Thessalonians 1:8). That would be a legacy even greater than the most beautiful photos, the most touching letters, or the most interesting mementos found in any box in the back of someone's linen closet. 

Audrey West is adjunct associate professor of New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and author of the 2004 *LWT Bible Study*, “Everyday Surprises: The Parables of Jesus.”

The ELCA Book of Faith initiative seeks to help Lutherans increase in Bible literacy. Go to www.bookoffaith.org to learn more.

Moved to a New Address

by Sarah Henrich



BIBLE STUDY

Theme Verse

Romans 6:13b

“Present your members to God as instruments of righteousness.”

Opening

Prayer

Gracious God, you reach out to us with an abundance of blessings. Give us grateful hearts, open to receive your gifts with joy. You also have given us one to another. Give us grateful hearts, open to receive one another with joy and patience. You have provided us with Scripture, the words of your child Paul. Help us grow in faithful love for you through his words. Amen.

Hymn

“O Christ, What Can It Mean for Us?”

Evangelical Lutheran Worship 431, verses 1 and 2

Introduction

In this day of cell phones, almost all of us overhear conversations—whether we want to or not. In the mall, at the grocery store, outside the library, in church, on the bus—people are busy talking to each other. Even if we don’t want to listen, other people’s conversations are sometimes loud enough that they make us part of

it. The problem is that we hear only one side of the conversation and never really know what the whole thing was all about.

Reading Paul’s letter to the Romans is a little like that for us and may even have been a little like that for the Romans themselves. Most of the believers in Rome, the people who first heard this letter, had never met Paul. I’m sure quite a few of them were puzzled by what he was saying and wished they had a chance to check it out with him.

For us it’s even more difficult. At least those ancient hearers would have known the language Paul wrote in and wouldn’t need to work as hard as we do to grasp it in translation. Many among the listeners would have known the big stories of the Jewish scriptures—stories of Adam, Abraham, David, and Moses. Even more helpful for them was the fact that the person reading the letter to them would have been someone sent by Paul himself. That someone, perhaps Phoebe who knew Paul and his message (see Romans 16:1–2), would have been able to interpret Paul’s words. She could have stopped for questions, noticed the confused looks on the faces turned toward her, and paused to explain. How wonderful it would be if we had that original messenger along with this letter.

Although that is impossible, we can do two things that might aid our understanding. One, we can continue to pray for God’s help, as we just did. Another way is to read the letter aloud or listen to it being read aloud. We can help each other listen for repeated words

and other clues, as we discussed in earlier sessions. In fact, we're going to begin with one of those clues right now, as we pick up Romans 6 and 7.

Interweaving Threads: Law, Obedience, and Freedom

Did you catch the *therefore* in Romans 6:12? Paul is using that familiar word to move on from the work he did in chapter 5 and 6:1–11. He ended that section with a very strong statement: “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (6:11). This is a clear statement: We have been changed. For Paul, it’s as if we have crossed a border and we cannot go back to the old country, where sin is in charge. Paul also understands both sin and death as powerful rulers under whose command we once lived. Now that we are baptized, we serve under the flag of a new ruler, God. So whether we think of it as a change of citizenship or a change of ownership, baptism is a real change in our life situation.

1. In our culture, we move around a lot. Have you ever made a move from one house, job, or city to another? What kinds of adjustments did that mean for you? Why does it take so much energy? How might these insights apply to the move of baptism?

“Therefore,” Paul says, “do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions.” Do you recall Paul’s rhetorical question in 6:1–2? There he firmly denied that continuing in sin was even a possibility for the baptized. Now, in verse 13, Paul says more about that. He insists that there is a positive alternative to the rule of sin and death in our earthly lives: serving God who is stronger than death, the God who wants our body, mind, and spirit to live rightly. Paul says straight out in verse 14, “Sin will have no dominion over you.” We have a new Lord. Paul puts it another way: Once the human family was

sinners like Adam. Now, he says, we are no longer members of Adam’s family, but of Christ’s.

Good enough so far. But wait a minute, Paul. Why mention the law all of a sudden in verse 14? It is essential to remember that Paul weaves threads into patterns. He has picked up the law thread again from 5:20. He reminds his hearers that the law had seemingly increased the amount of sin by identifying it as such. Paul is pulling up this law thread in order to weave it into the pattern that will develop in the rest of chapter 6 and in chapter 7.

Whose Are We, Anyway?

READ ROMANS 6:15. This verse takes off with a rhetorical question and another *therefore!* *Therefore* is translated *then* in some Bibles. “What then? Should we continue to sin because we are not under law but under grace?” Paul insists that the question itself is ridiculous. It’s not about the law, but about whose we are. In 6:16–23, Paul clarifies that all of the baptized are slaves to a new master.

Paul, like many others in the ancient world, understood humankind as slaves of one power or another. There was always someone to whom one was answerable, whom one must obey. For Paul, the shift from being slaves of sin and death to being slaves of God is another way of describing the complete change in the life situation of the baptized. (See “Changed by Baptism,” p. 6.)

2. In his explanation of the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed, Martin Luther in his Large Catechism reminds us that we always have some god or another. That upon which we set our hope and trust is our god. How does this statement seem like or unlike Paul’s claim that we humans always serve some master?

Those who are slaves to righteousness are freed from slavery to sin. According to Paul, our freedom is

not absolute, as our contemporary culture suggests. Instead, we are freed from sin and death so that we may be slaves—bodies, minds, and hearts—to right relationship with God and one another. We become obedient to God as we serve one another.

This is the same faithful obedience that we saw in Abraham (as Paul outlined in Romans 4) and that is shown mostly clearly in Jesus. Just as slaves in the Romans' world might receive some benefit for their loyalty to an earthly master, we, as God's slaves, receive sanctification and eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We seem to have come a long way. Beginning with sin, law, and grace (6:15), Paul has ended with that important phrase, "Christ Jesus our Lord" (6:23). As Paul sees it, the question in 6:15 is impossible for believers to even ask. Once a person is baptized and "under grace," that person has become a slave to God through Jesus Christ. Because of that, a believer has every advantage, every blessing that can be imagined. The opening question implies that there is a benefit to

us in sinning. The final verse declares that we already have every benefit God can give.

Our lives are not shaped by trying to calculate how much we can get away with just because God is gracious. Our lives are shaped by freedom to serve God without calculation. We already have it all.

All this talk of slavery takes place in the Roman real world. The Romans lived in the capital city of the Western world, surrounded by monuments and buildings dedicated to emperors and deities. Allegiance was owed to the emperor. Most people also worshiped at least one of the gods.

Paul is not writing, therefore, about private spirituality. His theology is political in the truest sense of the word—how our lives are run, what values shape our world, to whom we owe our first loyalty, and what difference that makes. For Christians then and now, our primary loyalty belongs to God and to God's ways for the world. Caesar—the earthly power—is at best subordinate to God.

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Women of the **ELCA**

3. In our own world there are many powers that seek our loyalty.

Do you ever feel that your loyalty to God does not fit with loyalty to other powers (political, economic, cultural, military)? How do you resolve this conflict?

Paul turns to another real-world example to illustrate his idea about a change of life situation: marriage. In 7:1 he asks, “Do you not know, brothers and sisters,” and goes on, suggesting that everybody knows what he is talking about: A woman is bound to her husband by the law as long as he lives. He points to something that was common knowledge to his listeners in order to explain how the law that is binding and useful in one situation simply does not apply in a different situation. For instance, the situation of a wife is different than that of a widow. The laws governing marriage no longer apply to a widow: That relationship is over. She is no longer bound to her husband. She is free to form another relationship.

Paul likens that reality to the situation of his hearers. In their baptism into the body of Christ, they have died to an old relationship that was governed by the law. Their bonds to the family of Adam, to sin, to death, no longer apply: That relationship is over. That law no longer binds them. They are free to form a new allegiance to the one who “has been raised from the dead” (7:4).

Paul repeats what he has said before: One relationship has ended. Another has begun. The old relationship existed under the law: The new one does not. Paul’s understanding of baptism, as presented in Romans 6, paves the way for his understanding of the law.

Paul wrestled with what the law meant in this new world of belief in Jesus Christ. The Jews understood (and still understand) the law as a beloved gift of God: Studying it was a way of being in the presence of God (see Psalm 119 for an example of this way of thinking). Paul, a Jew, knew and loved the law in this way. On the other hand, Paul had witnessed the coming of the Holy Spirit—God’s promised gift—on those who did not even

know the law. How could Paul understand a God who suddenly seemed to act to save outside God’s very own law? Why would God give the law as a blessing to the people led out of slavery—only to change the terms of the blessing later? Had God changed his mind? This concern about God’s consistency only grew more puzzling as more and more Gentiles came to believe in Christ while the Jews, God’s own chosen people, mostly were not persuaded that Jesus was God’s promised Messiah.

Paul’s marriage analogy is his solution to the puzzle. It puts the law in the context of an earlier relationship without taking away the value of that first relationship. In 7:6, Paul describes the earlier relationship under the law as one in which we were held by the written code. Now, he insists, “we [Jews and Gentiles alike] are slaves in the new life of the Spirit.”

READ VERSE 7:6 AGAIN. Paul will pursue this contrast between letter and Spirit in a complex way. In fact, his very next question in 7:7 is designed to make sure that we hearers don’t go down the wrong track, thinking that the contrast between letter and spirit is a black-and-white distinction that separates law and grace, or then and now, or Jews and Christians.

Instead, he uses a double attention-getter in verse 7: “then/therefore” and a rhetorical question. Paraphrased a bit, it sounds like this: “Based on everything I’ve said, shall we therefore say that the law is sin?” Paul answers his own question, “Of course not!” Instead Paul again insists that all have sinned, but the law made humankind aware that our slavery to sin was truly slavery. The law did not and does not cause sin; neither does the law lead to it. Rather, it makes it impossible for us to pretend innocence or ignorance.

Paul is not talking about all law when he uses this word. He is referring to the law given by God through Moses and others. Sometimes the word *law* refers to the first five books of Paul’s Hebrew Scripture (our Old Testament). Sometimes it refers to all Scripture including

the prophets, psalms, and other writings. It is important not to read our own understandings of the word *law* into Paul's writing in the letter to the Romans.

4. Think about the many ways that we use the word *law*. As you consider the list, can you come up with a definition of this word? Now think of two more lists: one that tells what is good about law and one that tells what is difficult about it.

What Shall We Do?

The beginning of this section of Paul's letter overlaps the end of the last one. It is in Romans 7:7 that Paul begins to use the word *I*. Scholars have worked long and hard on this section of Romans over the centuries. What is Paul trying to describe? In a nutshell, he looks back from his new state of reconciliation through Christ and tells a story of human experience with God. Just as Paul saw that both Adam and Abraham were like Christ, in this section he relies on familiar biblical stories to show how all humankind shares the experiences of Adam and God's chosen people Israel.

Let's begin with Adam. This comparison is most clear. Working through the chart on page 35 will help us see how Paul had the Genesis story in mind when he wrote Romans 7. If all human beings are subject to longing or covetousness, and we find that our covetousness can set us against God, what shall we do? Where might we find the power to live as we are called to live? Paul believes that God has given that power to all people through Jesus Christ. In verse 25, Paul gives thanks to God for deliverance from the power of sin through Jesus Christ.

Yet at the same time, he ends this chapter with a word of honest grief. Beginning with "So then/therefore," Paul talks about the real earthly lives of his hearers. There are no references to Adam, Abraham, or Jesus. Paul speaks of his and our reality. Paul's original Greek is very emphatic in verse 25b. Read this verse as if the first words were underlined: "*So then*, with my

mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin." Paul is alive to the Lord and the working of the Spirit among believers. He is dead to the old Adam. And yet, somehow, he is bound simply by being alive in this world.

Can we go back to Paul's analogy of the married woman? In his flesh, Paul represents both God's chosen people and all humanity, still bound up in a relationship with God that seems subject to the law. Even though Paul knows he is in a new relationship with God through Christ, he is still tied to his earthly life and to his people Israel. Freedom in Christ may be real, but it is not yet fully experienced. (See "Active Waiting," p. 14.)

5. One of the great strengths of the Bible is its unflinching honesty. Romans 7:25b is one example of this honesty. Are there ways that this verse describes your life and relationships, or that of someone you know (you don't have to say who)? How so? How not?

Genesis and Romans

READ GENESIS 3. This will give you a sense of the highlights that echoed for Paul.

Look at the chart on page 35 to see some interesting similarities between Genesis 3 and Romans 7.

This chart enables us to see how Paul has retold the Genesis story, speaking in Adam's voice.

6. Why might Paul do this? What does he accomplish by his retelling?

Paul's hearers, including us, can see that Paul is right in 7:12, that the law is "holy, and the commandments holy and good and just." It is a "spiritual law." But sin is a dynamic power and takes advantage of the law to become more powerfully alive among humans. Sin has used and continues to use the law to further separate human beings from God.

IF TIME PERMITS CONCEPTS OF SIN

How do you identify sin? Gather advertisements, photos, or articles from magazines, newspapers, or other print media anything that seems to you to be somehow about sin. Gather your pieces and arrange them in any way you want to convey your idea of sin in our own world. Share your arrangement with others. Consider the following questions (and discuss them if time allows):

- Does your concept of sin agree with Paul's concept as you understand it? How are the two alike? How are they different?
- What might be the response of Christians to sin as you have portrayed it? Is there any way we might, as Christ's body, work against the sins that you have seen?

Closing

Hymn

"As Saints of Old," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 695, verses 2 and 3

Prayer

Dearest Lord, I confess that I have at times allowed other powers too much hold over my life. Help me as I seek to be fully your child. Let your Holy Spirit live in me to guide me in living free and confident in your love. In the name of Jesus, I trust your merciful forgiveness for myself and all who turn to you. Amen.

Looking Ahead

In Romans 8, Paul draws the first half of Romans to a close. He has worked very hard to help us understand how times have changed since the death and resurrection of Jesus. At the same time, he has worked equally hard to say that God's purpose and will for humankind have not changed. As you read Romans 8 for next time, keep an eye open for some of Paul's most important themes—law, spirit, slavery, reckoning, and weakness—as he draws these threads together. What new threads appear? 🌿

The Rev. Sarah Henrich is professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn.

To see a video of Sarah discussing this Bible study session, go to www.lutheranwomantoday.org/Biblestudy.

Event	Passage in Genesis	Passage in Romans
Law identifies desire	Adam and Eve did not desire the fruit until they were told not to.	Romans 7:7
Sin finds a toehold in the commandment	Snake uses God's command to deceive Adam and Eve.	Romans 7:8
Without the law, sin lies dead	Snake had no toehold until God commanded Adam and Eve not to eat.	Romans 7:8
I once was alive apart from the law.	Adam and Eve's existence before God's command not to eat.	Romans 7:9
Sin uses the commandment to become alive in human life	Snake takes advantage of God's command to separate Adam and Eve from God.	Romans 7:9
Sin brings about death for humankind	The breaking of God's command brings death into the world for Adam and Eve.	Romans 7:10–11



ELCA DOMESTIC HUNGER GRANTS

Given the power of sin and evil in this world, as well as the complexity of environmental problems, we know we can find no “quick fix”—whether technological, economic, or spiritual. A sustainable environment requires a sustained effort from everyone.

“Caring for Creation,” ELCA social statement



by Aaron Cooper

FINDING CLEAN WATER IN APPALACHIA

In rural Boone County, West Virginia, Jennifer Massey bathes her children in contaminated water. It's either that or not bathe them at all. The well water in the remote mountain community of Prenter where she lives contains elevated levels of lead, arsenic, and manganese. This might explain the rust-colored chunks spit out by her water heater. And until the contamination was

discovered a few years ago, Massey and her family drank the same water as her 29-year-old brother—who died of a brain tumor.

Many Prenter residents cite local mining activity for the pollution in their well water—something Massey helped discover.

One day Massey accompanied Richard Watts of Ackenheil Engineers and Geologists Inc. as they

went door to door and tested the water in her neighbors' homes. While there, Watts also conducted a brief health survey and discovered that almost all of the residents they visited had had their gallbladders removed.

One woman told them about being pregnant more than a decade earlier. Doctors had discovered a large tumor in her abdomen but

could not remove it because of the baby. "By the time she delivered," said Massey, "the baby weighed about five pounds and the tumor weighed seven."

Massey has had \$10,000 worth of dental work, including crowns, done in the last few years. Over \$5,000 of dental work has been performed on her 7-year-old son, Ryan. When he was an infant, Massey would mix his formula with well water. Soon thereafter, Ryan developed acid reflux disease.

Her youngest son, Clay, age 5, suffers a chronic skin disease called eczema, which is aggravated when he comes in contact with their well water. "He constantly has scratches and scars and issues with his skin," she said.

Last year, Clay spent a few nights in intensive care after suffering a severe asthma attack. In Boone County, instances of asthma, eczema, and other illnesses are well above the national average. In some areas, over 80 percent of people have had their gallbladders removed.

Globally, one in six people lacks access to safe drinking water. That statistic often appears next to stories of impoverished villages around the developing world where people walk for miles each day to fetch one pail of drinkable water. But in the United States, in communities like Boone County, this figure is much higher than one in six.

When Massey's brother, Randall, died of a brain tumor, he was living down the street from her, using water from the same contaminated well. Half the homes on their street included at least one family member with a brain tumor. According to the National Cancer Institute, the national average for the occurrence of a tumor in the brain or other nervous system is 6.4 per 100,000 people, or 1 in 15,625.

Statistical "clusters" like this appear in communities that suffer a higher-than-average incidence of illness and disease. In the Prenter community, some of these illnesses are fatal and many would be preventable, if only residents had access to clean water.

"To learn of the plight of Prenter, West Virginia, one must dig for the information," said the Rev. Ralph Dunkin, bishop of the ELCA's West Virginia-Western Maryland Synod. "News of southern West Virginia does not travel quickly to the north or eastern part of this state. The mountains and hollers keep us apart in more ways than just travel. If it was not for one of our state legislators who carried a mason jar of Prenter's water to share with other legislators to drink, we might not have learned of this issue."

NO WAY OUT

"When we first figured out that our water was contaminated," Massey

said, "the first thing we wanted to do was protect our children."

She and her husband put their house up for sale. They bid on another home and readied their family to move. Another family who had also lost a brother to a brain tumor bid on Massey's house, but the deal fell through. The prospective buyers had learned about the water.

"You can't sell a house with contaminated water," Massey said. "Who would want it? You can bathe in [the water], but it's nasty." Before some residents of Prenter sued several area coal mines to resolve the situation, others founded the Prenter Water Fund, a non-profit organization that has purchased 55-gallon water tanks for members of the community. A delivery truck fills these tanks with water that is safe to drink.

Phase one of the remedies called for by the lawsuit will connect Prenter permanently to a nearby city's water system; however, any damage awards that may be paid to families like Massey's who have lost loved ones remain years off. Meanwhile, though residents now have safe water to drink, they continue to bathe in contaminated water.

WATER WEEKEND

When Sarah Soltow heard about the water situation in Prenter, she wanted to help.

ANTI-HUNGER MINISTRIES IN THE UNITED STATES

ELCA World Hunger awards grants to churches and organizations like Community Lutheran Partners, Inc. that run anti-hunger ministries throughout the United States. This money is distributed through the Domestic Hunger Grants Program in the areas of relief, development, and community organizing.

To learn more about ELCA World Hunger and its work both in the United States and around the world, visit www.elca.org/hunger.

To learn more about the ELCA Domestic Hunger Grants Program, go to www.elca.org/domestichungergrants.

You can donate to ELCA World Hunger through Women of the ELCA. Make your check out to "Women of the ELCA" and note "ELCA World Hunger Appeal" on the memo line of the check. Send your check to Women of the ELCA, P.O. Box 71256, Chicago IL 60694. One hundred percent of your donation will go to ELCA World Hunger.

Soltow is executive director of Community Lutheran Partners, Inc. (CLP), a social ministry organization in the West Virginia–Western Maryland Synod supported by ELCA World Hunger through the Domestic Hunger Grants Program.

CLP's mission is "to enable and support congregations of the West Virginia–Western Maryland Synod and others in service to their neighbors."

Last spring, Soltow and Massey collaborated to organize a "Water Weekend." CLP provided 2,000 gallons of safe drinking water for Prenter. In turn, Massey coordinated two public panel presentations. One panel was made up of local educators who discussed the importance of safe water, and another panel hosted community members who spoke of their experiences with water contamination.

After the presentations, groups of CLP volunteers—including many youth and young adults—and community members went door to door delivering water and educational pamphlets about the importance of safe water.

Massey and her husband led one of four groups that altogether visited nearly 200 homes that day.

"Although the 2,000 gallons of water was a wonderful form of relief," said Massey, "in my opinion the greatest thing that came of . . . 'Water Weekend' was knowledge."

"To hear of poverty rates from 18 to 33 percent in Southern West Virginia counties is shocking," said Soltow, "but to tear rotten flooring out from a home repeatedly flooded by a contaminated creek, to help a disabled Vietnam vet weatherize the borrowed house he lives in . . . and to carry water to homes whose wells have been poisoned by the by-products of coal mining . . . these experiences affect people deeply."

SEEING IT THROUGH

Massey wants to go to sleep at night knowing that her body and those of her family members are not being poisoned by the one natural resource they cannot live without. Whether in a courtroom, going door to door, or working side by side with people and organizations like Community Lutheran Partners, Inc., Massey and her neighbors will not rest until the water flowing into their homes will help prolong their lives instead of shorten them. Meanwhile, they also know that the mining operations in Appalachia aren't going anywhere.

"We are a mining community," said Massey. "They're mining the hills behind us, they mine below us, they're all around us. And that's literally all that there is in Boone County. That is our economy. But we need to do it better." 🌿

Aaron Cooper is the writer-editor for ELCA World Hunger.



Mountaintop mining



Acid run-off



CLP members deliver drinkable water

Mountaintop removal

At work in Boone County and in many other parts of Appalachia is one of the most controversial mining methods: mountaintop removal (MTR).

Mountaintop removal mines provide profitable access to thin seams of coal buried beneath the surface of a mountain. Miners use explosives to blast away the tops of mountains or giant bulldozers and excavators to slowly reduce the elevation of densely-forested mountain peaks by up to 1,000 feet. The “wasted rock” is usually dumped into the valleys between mountains—valley fill—where streams often flow. These mountain streams are the source of many communities’ water.

Valley fill drastically alters the hydrology of affected areas. When rainwater drops into valley fill instead of a typical stream bed, it is filtered through broken shale and sandstone before draining down into the stream bed. Heavy metals liberated by the extreme mining practice enter the streams and are carried into connected waterways.

Coal must be cleaned before it can be processed. One practice at work in Boone County and many mining areas of Appalachia erects large conveyor-belt-like systems where water is used to wash the coal. The waste water is called coal slurry. Some mining companies inject the slurry into sediment ponds or abandoned

mines. Since there is no good containment system to prevent the waste water from filtering into the surrounding underground water and waterways, the slurry—carrying high levels of lead, arsenic, manganese, and other minerals—makes its way into the wells and homes of nearby communities.

The Appalachian Mountains took 300 million years to form. Mountaintop removal is a practice that feeds millions of energy-hungry consumers with otherwise unreachable coal by a method that is faster and less labor-intensive than the cleaner method of underground mining. However, the environmental cost is devastating.

Women of the ELCA's commitment

More than 300,000 mountaintop acres in West Virginia alone have been blasted into moonscape by mountaintop removal (MTR),

with more than 1,000 miles of freshwater streams buried by the valley fills. Topsoil and trees that absorbed rainfall and protected

valley communities from flooding continue to disappear. The health of our neighbors, our sisters and brothers, is adversely affected by

the minerals and metals leached into their aquifers.

Women of the ELCA is committed to faithful stewardship of earth's fresh water supply.

Women of the ELCA's Appalachian cross-cultural immersion experiences in 2006 and 2007 revealed the devastation of MTR mining to participants. Our 2008 Triennial Convention voted to adopt a memorial from the West Virginia-Western Maryland Synodical Women's Organization that agreed to "work with ELCA synods in the Appalachian region through social advocacy affiliates such as Evangelical Lutheran

Church's Mission in Appalachia and through service affiliates such as Community Lutheran Partners, Inc. that the most affected by MTR may learn how to address the damage of MTR as well as learn how to secure the direct aid needed."

To stop mountaintop removal, it will take all of us speaking with our families and neighbors in the Appalachian coal fields. This fits the mission of our organization—to mobilize women to act boldly on their faith in Jesus Christ.

Coalfield communities are in states where coal companies have enormous political power. The odds are overwhelming against

correcting MTR at the local or state level. Letters and calls to Congress are vital to stop MTR.

We can write to the governors of states where MTR occurs: West Virginia, Virginia, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee. Also write to the Division of Environmental Protection, Office of Mining and Reclamation in each of these states.

Your voice can advocate for justice and the care of creation by writing members of the state senates and houses of representatives in these states.

—Inez Torres Davis, *Women of the ELCA director for justice*



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“ My relationships with women brighten my life every day. My grandma is an excellent example. She's an incredible role model, and her kind spirit shines through. She showed me what is essential in my life. ”

—Tiffany, Youth Gathering participant

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Women of the ELCA 



GRACE NOTES

Proof Enough

by Linda Post Bushkofsky



The other day I ran

across this quote from Jacques Ellul: "Prayer is not a discourse. It is a form of life, the life with God. That is why it is not confined to the moment of verbal statement." The quote caught my attention for the truth it speaks. I wasn't familiar with Jacques Ellul, so I went to the Internet to learn more. In another time I might have turned to an encyclopedia, but now I regularly take my reference questions online to Wikipedia.org.

Wikipedia describes itself as a free-content encyclopedia project, written collaboratively by volunteers all around the globe. As the site says, "people of all ages and cultural and social backgrounds can write Wikipedia articles. Most of the articles can be edited by anyone with access to the Internet. . . . Anyone is welcome to add information, cross-references, or citations, as long as they do so within Wikipedia's editing policies and to an appropriate standard."

Back to Ellul. The Wikipedia article told me that Ellul was a French philosopher, law professor, sociologist, theologian, and Christian anarchist who lived from 1912 to 1994. The article chronicles Ellul's life, all with citations and sources neatly arranged in footnotes with Internet links. One paragraph begins, "Ellul converted to Christianity at 22." And here we find a note saying "citation needed." That caught my eye. So the author of that portion of the article knew that Ellul had become a Christian, but had no source to cite. Given how Wikipedia operates, another person could insert

a citation there. What could prove that Ellul was a Christian?

If someone were to write a Wikipedia entry about you or me, what proof would be cited to support the claim that we are Christians? In my case, there'd be baptism and confirmation certificates. Would that be proof enough? There are my congregation's records of my giving. That seems somewhat circumstantial, doesn't it? It's a bit like the old saw, "If you were charged with being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

The real proof comes in the way we lead our daily lives: the choices we make, the words we use, the way we treat each other and all of creation, the care we extend, the advocacy we accomplish, the fellowship and community that we share, the prayers we offer, the praise we sing. Those things don't fit neatly into a footnote.

What about your unit? Would there be proof enough that yours is a group of Christian women who act boldly on their faith in Jesus Christ? Would someone be confused as they looked into your meetings, wondering if you were just a social club? Or a group of women who love eating good food together? Or a gathering of crafters? What is the evidence that your unit is living out the mission and purpose of Women of the ELCA?

Year end is always a good time for reflection. Take some time now, to reflect on these questions. 🌸

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director, Women of the ELCA.



AMEN!

Bound To

by Catherine Malotky

The baby squalled a

bit when the water coursed over her head. The parents hoped for quiet. The young godmother hoisted the newly baptized to her shoulder to pat and calm her. What changed for this child on the other side of the water?

Oh, God, if it's all a ruse, we have been fools for many centuries. We have understood that in the water we are joined to Christ. Baptism marks our rebirth. We were yours long before, but in that ritual moment we make a public commitment to that identity.

But after the service ends, isn't it true that things pretty much go back to normal? The baby is fussy. She will continue to demand that her needs be met, and the adults in her life will do all they can to be sure she is safe, happy, and healthy. She will try out her power in a couple of years, testing the patience of those around her. She will challenge the authorities in her life in little more than a decade. She will stretch and fail, succeed and rejoice. What difference will it have made that she is yours?

You have bound yourself to her, gracious God. She may choose to claim that as her own. She may choose to be bound in return, or not.

There will be many other places for her to commit her loyalties as she grows.

- She may be a slave to how she looks to others. Perhaps it will be her reputation she is enslaved to—as a fun-loving person, or a hard worker, or even as a good Christian.

- She may be a slave to her own ignorance. If she is overwhelmed by a complicated world, she may choose to ignore it all, hide herself and her life in places she perceives to be safe ignoring her neighbor, a sibling in Christ.

- She may be a slave to her own need to survive. Frankly, we all are. Our personal demons, our particular insecurities, our hopes and dreams . . . our vision is limited. We can see only through our own lenses, even with empathetic imaginations. We are short-sighted and self-sighted. The neighbor, if we do not work hard at it, will always come second.

You have chosen her, God, and this little one may choose to be bound to you in return. We, who have lived with the promise of baptism for many years, may—on our best days—also choose to be bound to you and live a if we are. But there are so many others who ask for our loyalty.

Yet, regardless of her point of view (or ours), you have chosen her (and us). You will be along for the ride until her last breath (and ours). And beyond.

In the dark of winter, when Christmas is before us, we remember that this is the miracle of the baby we await. This is the promise. We are baptized into Christ, and you choose us, God. In Jesus we believe this to be true. We welcome him, your bond. Amen. 🌸

The Rev. Catherine Malotky serves the ELCA Board of Pensions as retirement planning manager. An ordained pastor, she has also been an editor, teacher, parish pastor, and retreat leader.



Marci Hausauer, a member of Lord of Life Lutheran Church, Bismarck, North Dakota, is pictured with 209 school bags she sewed for Lutheran World Relief this year. She estimates that since 2001, she has sewn about 1,400 school bags with sturdy handles and Velcro closures that help prevent the contents from spilling. Marci also works on Lutheran World Relief quilts at home and at church with the rest of the quilting team. Many, many thanks to this industrious lady!

—Submitted by Pastor Larry Giese

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